

Victoria, Canada is a small city with a big farm-to-table scene

By Liza Weisstuch April 24 2015 | W Post

Spinnakers Brewpub, on Vancouver Island, bills itself as “relentlessly local.” That seemingly hyperbolic tagline, I came to see, is actually an understatement. After all, few are the gastropubs that offer a selection of vinegars produced from the beers brewed on the premises.

I decided to bring home a particularly intriguing India pale ale malt vinegar. And while I was at it, I picked up some chocolate truffles, displayed in a glass case and sold by the pound: dark chocolate with lavender and peppercorn, absinthe and basil, chipotle and bacon. It was like Ghirardelli gone haute cuisine.

Opened in 1984 and recognized as the first brewpub in Canada, the place is decked out in dark wood furniture and features floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a sweeping view of Victoria Harbor’s Lime Bay. The space evokes a classically cozy French countryside retreat, but dishes are decidedly anti-classic: oysters on the half-shell are doused in pumpkin-ale-infused vinegar; a brick-oven pizza selection is strewn with house-smoked wild salmon, blackberries from a nearby farm, red onion, local brie, honey-infused sour cream and fresh basil and rosemary. And the beers are designed for pairing. The day’s India pale ale was, surprisingly,

a pleasing complement to the pizza, the hops playing easily off the basil and creamy brie.

In most metropolitan cities these days, restaurants wear “local” as a badge of honor, but in Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, which is 72 miles southwest of Vancouver, local cuisine is axiomatic. The Capital Region District, which is composed of Victoria and its bordering townships, covers about 7 percent of the 290-by-50-mile island, but it’s home to almost 350,000 people, which accounts for nearly half of the island’s population. You can bet that leaves plenty of land for farming. And it has a temperate climate, making for ideal growing conditions.

Victoria has a college-town vibe, what with its quaint streets, a bevy of coffeehouses and indie shops that outnumber the Starbucks outlets and retail chains. Old stately buildings, many of which now stand as modern hotels, have been revamped in a manner that maintains the properties’ heritage.

The downtown district has a Möbius strip-like quality to it. As I wandered through what seemed like a grid layout, I’d realize that the road had curved and taken me nearly back to where I started. It seems only fitting for a town that operates in an efficient and self-contained fashion: a beer made on one end of the block quickly ends up on tap at the restaurant around the corner.

It was an irrationally sunny afternoon in February and my Facebook feed was filling up with photos of gigantic snow mounds in Boston. On the recommendation of a bartender at Spinnakers, I visited 10 Acres, an airy, rustic-chic spot that bills itself as “Bistro + Bar + Farm.” Mike Murphy, the burly owner and Victoria native, owned restaurants in the

city for 25 years and opened 10 Acres in 2013. His newest spot, Pescatores, opened this week.



Orchardist Bob Duncan uses clever low-tech techniques to grow an astonishing variety of citrus, figs, apples and more on less than an acre of land an hour from downtown Victoria. (Liza Weisstuch/for the Washington Post)

The menu here is determined by Murphy's 10-acre farm, located 17 miles north and gloriously documented on the restaurant's Facebook page with photographs that could qualify as agriculture porn: piles of spindly, colorful heirloom carrots, close-ups of plump tomatoes ripening on the vine, dirt-dusted magenta radishes.

As my friend and I snacked on a quinoa salad with tangy house-pickled veggies, we ordered rounds of Blue Buck, a lightly hopped amber beer made a few streets over at Phillips Brewing. Meanwhile, Murphy, who has a linebacker's build, a grizzled voice and an easy laugh, was wandering the floor. When I asked what's growing now, he rattled off numbers like a stock analyst running through yesterday's gains: 450 fruit trees, 700 crowns of asparagus, 110 hazelnut trees, and so on.

Then he dropped a word I'd never heard before: orchardist. He said he was inspired by Bob Duncan, who grows a wide variety of apples, peaches, pears, olives and citrus on three-quarters of an acre of land about an hour outside the city. My curiosity piqued (olives growing in Canada?), I called Duncan and made arrangements to stop by the next day for a visit.

Duncan, a former entomologist who now lectures on agriculture at universities around the world, oversees an operation involving ingenious low-tech systems. Affable and professorial, he showed me how he strings Christmas lights through citrus trees and rigs them up to a thermostat; the lights go on to warm the tree when temperatures fall below freezing. He explained his technique for training branches of cherry, apricot and almond trees to grow parallel to the ground, allowing offshoots to grow vertically for larger yields. With tricks like these, he boasts about 50 varieties of figs, 30 kinds of citrus and much more.



Local food producers and casual eateries fill the Victoria Public Market, which opened in 2013. (Liza Weisstuch/for The Washington Post)

But the region's bounty goes far beyond fruit. The Victoria Public Market, which opened in the fall of 2013 in a 102-year-old building that had long housed a historic department store, was a long time coming. Farmers set up a market outside in the spring, but inside, it's a year-round home to local purveyors. I strolled through, picking up a pot of truffle goat cheese — one of 10 varieties sold at the Salt Spring Island cheese counter — and a warm wild mushroom pie from the Victoria Pie Co. Nearby I bought a handmade natural hand lotion from a man selling Nightingale Natural, so named because it was developed by his wife, a nurse.

But there was one more local treasure I wanted to try: Canadian whiskey, which is in the throes of a renaissance. It's an industry that's growing at fast enough of a clip to merit the creation of the Canadian Whisky Awards. It's an industry piquing enough interest to make liquor conglomerates pay attention. In March 2014, for instance, Campari America spent \$120.5 million for Forty Creek Whisky, a company in Ontario started in 1992 by a former winemaker.



The Argyle Attic features a variety of Canadian whiskeys. (Liza Weisstuch/for The Washington Post)

Canadian distilleries are taking cues from Kentucky bourbonmakers and releasing single barrel products and limited-edition expressions. They're

more complex and full-bodied than such fusty standards as Canadian Club, which is historically accompanied by ginger ale. The whiskey's versatility is on full display at Argyle Attic — part antique-chic parlor, part playfully kitschy hunting lodge — located upstairs from a modern pub. Here is where Canadian whiskey is perched on the shelf next to high-end Japanese labels and Scotches. Here is where bartenders put their own twists on American standards, as with the Trans-Canada Sour, a velvety, tangy tippie built on Wiser's Small Batch whiskey, sweetened with Canadian maple syrup and thickened with egg whites. There are creative originals, such as the WD40, another Wiser's-based drink that packs an earthy, herbal punch with its sarsaparilla bark syrup and plum- and root-beer-flavored bitters from Vancouver.

I kicked back in a stately leather couch in front of a fireplace, a taxidermied deer head watching from above. I thought about all the bogus jokes that I've heard about my northerly neighbor (What's the difference between yogurt and Canada? Yogurt has an active culture), and I laughed.

IF YOU GO

Where to eat and drink

10 Acres Bistro + Bar + Farm

611 Courtney St., Victoria

250-220-8008

www.10acres.ca

The owner's farm supplies the produce and livestock at this rustic-chic eatery. About \$26 lets you fill up on an appetizer such as house sausages, a large dish such as Salt Spring Island mussels or brisket burger, and a pint.

Argyle Attic

777 Courtney St., Victoria

250-360-2544

www.argyleattic.com

Vintage parlor meets cozy hunting lodge at this hip hangout. About \$20 a person is enough for a Canadian whiskey or imaginative cocktail with some creative comfort food, like curried poutine and artisanal veggie burgers.

Fruit Trees and More

724 Wain Rd., North Saanich

250-656-4269

www.fruittreesandmore.com

Orchardist Bob Duncan grows hundreds of varieties of fruits and vegetables on less than an acre using innovative, natural techniques. Call for appointment.

Spinnakers Gastro Brewpub & Guesthouses

308 Catherine St., Victoria

250-386-2739

www.spinnakers.com

House beers and inventive, locavore fare are the M.O. at this long-running harborside spot. About \$40 will get you a salad or starter, a main dish and a house brew to pair with it.

Victoria Public Market

1701 Douglas St., Victoria

778-433-2787

www.victoriapublicmarket.com

Part nouveau food court, part European-style market, this bazaar houses vendors hawking local cheese, natural meats, wine and more. Additional vendors set up indoors on weekends and there's a seasonal outdoor farmers' market.

Information

www.tourismvictoria.com

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